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BODIES, CONFERENCES AND
RELATED QUESTIONS:
ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 48/109 of 20 December 1993, the General Assembly requested the Secretary General to prepare a report on the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas and to submit it, through the Economic and Social Council, to the Assembly at its fiftieth session. Reports on the subject have been submitted to the Assembly in 1985 (A/40/239 and Add.1), 1989 (A/44/516) and 1993 (A/48/187-E/1993/76).

2. The issue of rural women has been on the international agenda for a long time. It has been addressed in various conferences and agreements, as reflected in the final documents of the three World Conferences on Women in 1975, 1980 and 1985, the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, in 1979, the World Summit for Children, in 1990, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in 1992, the World Conference on Human Rights and the International Conference on Population and Development, in 1994, and the World Summit for Social Development, in 1995. It was considered at the Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women, organized in 1992 under the auspices

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of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Issues related to rural women can be found throughout the critical areas of concern in the draft Platform for Action to be adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Considerable information has thus been collected, analysed and presented over the past two decades about the situation of women in rural areas.

3. The report requested by the General Assembly will seek to update that information, taking into account a number of new and emerging perspectives on the issue. Because much of the information on which the analysis will be based is only recently becoming available, the present report to the Economic and Social Council is an interim one, setting out the approach and method of analysis being employed. The full report will be submitted to the General Assembly, taking into account the views that may be expressed by the Council.

4. Over the past decade, there has been no radical change in the situation of rural women and the types of actions necessary to improve it. In policy terms, there is a general consensus about what should be done, as expressed in the reports of international conferences and the resolutions adopted by intergovernmental bodies and expert seminars and meetings. These include:

(a) Access to land, capital/credit, technology;

(b) Access to gainful employment;

(c) Support for non-agricultural activities;

(d) Access to markets;

(e) At least a minimum level of social infrastructure;

(f) Availability of basic health and family planning services;

(g) Access to education, including adult education, aimed at eliminating illiteracy;

(h) Access to water, electricity, energy resources;

(i) Social support measures, e.g., child-care facilities and social security;

(j) Access to decision-making at all levels;

(k) Empowerment of women;

(l) Community organization and training.

5. These affirmations have been made in various ways over the past 20 years. There is considerable evidence that, as is the case with the global economy as a whole and with developing countries in general, rural societies are undergoing fundamental changes.

6. Demographic projections now suggest that some time around the year 2006, half of the world's population will be living in urban areas and the proportion of women living in rural areas will continue to decline globally as it has in some regions already.

7. The importance of rural women in the next century will rest more on their impact on the economy and society than on their numbers. It will be related to their contribution to food security and to economic growth, as well as to the maintenance of social cohesion.

8. Taking into account previous analyses, the report will seek to examine the trends that will affect the status of rural women in the twenty-first century. The analysis will centre on the changes in the world in terms of urbanization, environmental protection, globalization of trade, the information revolution and the consequences of women achieving equal rights. It will outline the situation of rural women on the brink of the next century and suggest policy issues that will have to be addressed. In so doing, it will compare the situation of women in countries that have experienced significant economic growth with those in countries that have had slower growth.

9. Urbanization is a universal phenomenon. Urban growth occurs both because of natural growth in urban populations and because of rural-urban migration. In the early stages, migration is the dominant factor. Migration is not gender neutral. It is the gender difference in migration that can determine the situation of rural women.

10. With the rural male exodus, women remain alone to raise children and provide care for the elderly. When they lack the right to ownership of land or livestock or when they have to depend on the remittances of male migrants, poverty is often a consequence. However, when migration is predominantly female, the pattern is different.

11. There is growing evidence that in low-growth areas, it is men who migrate, while in high-growth areas, women migrate, particularly younger women. This can be seen in the table, which shows the ratio of women to men in urban and rural areas among the young adult cohorts. 1/ In regions that have experienced greater and more rapid economic growth, it appears that post-school-age women migrate at a greater rate than men. In countries that have had less growth, it is young men who have been more likely to migrate.

12. The patterns of rural-to-urban migration observed in each of these regions are consistent with regional trends in economic development with respect to trade orientation, the inflow of foreign direct investment and the type of employment in export-processing industries. The creation of export-processing zones in the context of export-promotion policies has undoubtedly contributed to fostering female migration from rural to urban areas in the first and second generation of the newly industrialized economies of East and South-East Asia and Latin American and the Caribbean.

13. Migration has effects on the rural economy generally and on gender relations which need to be examined. On the one hand, male migration can undercut agriculture when food production is affected by traditional sex-based

divisions of labour and when women lack access to credit, technology and markets. On the other hand, female migration can erode traditional systems as migrants take on new urban values, institutions such as the extended family become less effective because of physical distance and kin-based obligations become less important. At the same time remittances from migrants can become a significant part of the rural economy.

Table 1. Ratio of women to men in total, urban and rural population (1990 census round)

(Number of women for each 100 men)

Region	Age group	Total Population	Urban population	Rural population
Africa	15-19	99.7	98.9	110.0
	20-24	100.2	98.5	109.7
Latin America	15-19	98.4	106.1	87.3
	20-24	100.6	108.9	88.2
Western Europe	15-19	95.6	97.2	91.3
	20-24	95.6	98.8	86.5
Asia and Pacific	15-19	94.6	93.0	96.3
	20-24	94.4	90.9	96.9
East Asia	15-19	93.8	93.6	93.8
	20-24	93.5	95.6	86.4
South-East Asia	15-19	96.8	98.7	96.8
	20-24	98.6	100.3	98.2
Eastern Europe	15-19	94.8	93.9	93.4
	20-24	95.2	95.8	92.9

Source: Women's Indicators and Statistics Database (WISTAT), version 3, 1994.

14. The interaction between sex-specific migration and rural society will be examined as a major theme of the report.

15. The transformation of societies towards an urban base provides opportunities as well as problems. The strategic role of rural areas in the production of food becomes more important and can be a source of growth, since an increasing share of production will have to be marketed rather than self-consumed. Moreover, the increase in cash income of the rural population can provide a stimulus for the urban economy through increases in consumption of basic goods. Owing to the fact that, in a large number of the developing countries, women predominate in food production and marketing, this should provide enhanced opportunities for rural women.

16. The concept of food security has been evolving over time, from understanding food security as simply supply and sufficiency at the global and national levels, to focus on access to food and the ability to acquire it not only on the global or national level but also at the household and individual levels. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations defines food security as ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food they need.

17. The concept of sustainable food security also implies the consideration of such issues as income and land distribution, fertility and population, as well as the environment.

18. It is recognized that rural women are responsible for producing more than half of the developing world's food supply. In Africa alone, women produce an estimated 70 per cent of the continent's food and purchase nearly all the food consumed by their families. In North Africa and the Middle East, women's heavy involvement in the livestock sector and their labour in family fields results in significant contributions to food supplies. In Asia, there is a tendency for women to work with their husbands in family fields and/or provide family food supplies from their incomes earned in wage labour or in off-farm micro-enterprises. Rural women in Latin America also harvest and process food crops, raise livestock and participate in income-generating activities. Poor households are even more dependent on women's involvement in the production, processing, storage and purchasing of food. Women's capacities to produce food and to generate income to purchase food are critical for the survival of families. There is growing evidence that women allocate a greater share of their incomes to food purchase then do men. Children in female-headed households are often better nourished.

19. Food security is related to economic growth, and growth in production is closely linked to the role of rural women in the development process.

20. This aspect of the situation of rural women will be the second major theme of the report.

Notes

1/ There are few global indicators of rural/urban migration. However, an estimate of the gender composition of migration can be seen from the ratio of women to men in urban and rural populations compared to the national average. If there are more men than the national average in urban areas, the migration has been primarily of males. If there are more women than the national average in urban areas, migration has been primarily of females.